European Journal of
Health Sciences
(EJHS)

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European Journal of Health Sciences
ISSN 2520-4645 (online)
Vol. 10 No 2, pp 24 - 34, 2024

www.ajpojournals.org

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Article history

Submitted 05.01.2024 Revised Version Received 15.02.2024 Accepted 16.03.2024

Abstract

Purpose: The aim of the study was to assess the association between dietary patterns and obesity rates in Africa.

Methodology: This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

Findings: The study suggests that diets rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins are inversely correlated with obesity prevalence. These patterns, often referred to as "healthy" or "Mediterranean" diets, are associated with lower body mass index (BMI) and reduced risk of obesity-related diseases. Conversely, diets high in processed foods, sugars, and saturated fats exhibit a positive correlation with obesity rates. These "Western" dietary patterns not only contribute to weight gain but also increase the risk of metabolic disorders such as type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular diseases.

Implications to Theory, Practice and Policy: Social-ecological model, health belief model and socioeconomic gradient theory may be used to anchor future studies on assessing the association between dietary patterns and obesity rates in Africa. Develop culturally tailored interventions targeting specific dietary behaviors and socio-cultural contexts prevalent in different European regions, thereby promoting healthier dietary patterns and reducing obesity rates. Advocate for evidence-based policies promoting healthier food environments, such as taxation on sugary beverages, restrictions on marketing unhealthy foods to children, and subsidies for fruits and vegetables.

Keywords: *Association, Dietary Patterns, Obesity Rates*

INTRODUCTION

The association between dietary patterns and obesity rates is a topic of significant interest in public health research. As societies continue to grapple with rising obesity rates worldwide, understanding the role of dietary habits becomes paramount. Obesity rates have been steadily rising globally, presenting a significant public health challenge. In developed economies like the United States, the prevalence of obesity has reached alarming levels. For instance, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the obesity rate among adults in the United States was 42.4% in 2017-2018, representing a notable increase from previous years. This trend is concerning as obesity is associated with various health complications such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, and certain cancers (Hales et al., 2020). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, obesity rates have been on the rise. According to the National Health Service (NHS), in 2019, around 28% of adults in England were classified as obese, reflecting a significant health concern (NHS Digital, 2020).

In developing economies, obesity rates are also increasing, albeit at a different pace compared to developed countries. For example, in Japan, traditionally known for its low obesity rates, there has been a noticeable shift in recent years. According to a study published in the Journal of Epidemiology, the prevalence of obesity among Japanese adults increased from 3.9% in 1997 to 5.7% in 2016 (Kobayashi et al., 2019). This increase is attributed to changing dietary habits and lifestyle factors associated with urbanization and economic development. Similarly, in countries like Mexico, obesity rates have surged rapidly. The World Health Organization (WHO) reports that in 2016, around 28.9% of adults in Mexico were obese, representing a significant increase from previous decades (WHO, 2020).

In Sub-Saharan economies, while obesity rates might be comparatively lower than in developed and some developing economies, there is evidence of a growing problem. For instance, in South Africa, obesity rates have been steadily increasing. According to a study published in BMC Public Health, the prevalence of obesity among adults in South Africa rose from 24.8% in 2000 to 42.0% in 2016 (Reddy et al., 2020). This trend is concerning as it poses significant challenges to healthcare systems already strained by infectious diseases and other health issues prevalent in the region.

In developing economies, obesity rates are escalating due to a combination of factors such as urbanization, changes in dietary patterns, and sedentary lifestyles. For instance, in Brazil, there has been a concerning increase in obesity rates over the past few decades. According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the prevalence of obesity among adults rose from 11.8% in 2006 to 20.3% in 2019 (IBGE, 2019). This rise is associated with shifts towards a more Westernized diet, increased consumption of processed foods, and reduced physical activity levels.

Similarly, in India, a country experiencing rapid economic growth and urbanization, obesity rates have been steadily climbing. According to a study published in the Indian Journal of Community Medicine, the prevalence of obesity among Indian adults increased from 9.3% in 2006 to 20.6% in 2016 (Gupta et al., 2019). This rise is attributed to changing dietary habits, decreased physical activity, and increased consumption of high-calorie foods. The implications of these trends are significant, as obesity is linked to a higher risk of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes,

hypertension, and cardiovascular diseases, placing a substantial burden on healthcare systems in these developing economies.

In other developing economies like China, obesity rates have also been on the rise. With rapid economic growth and urbanization, there has been a shift towards a more sedentary lifestyle and changes in dietary habits. According to a study published in The Lancet, the prevalence of obesity among adults in China nearly tripled from 3.7% in 2004 to 11.9% in 2015 (Abarca-Gómez et al., 2017). This increase is concerning as it contributes to the burden of non-communicable diseases and places strain on healthcare resources.

Moreover, in countries like Nigeria, obesity rates are increasing alongside the double burden of malnutrition. While undernutrition remains a significant issue, particularly in rural areas, urbanization and changing lifestyles have led to a rise in obesity rates, particularly among urban populations. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the prevalence of obesity among adults in Nigeria increased from 8.1% in 2010 to 11.7% in 2016 (WHO, 2020). These trends underscore the complex interplay of socio-economic factors, cultural norms, and globalization in shaping obesity prevalence in developing economies.

In other developing economies such as Indonesia, obesity rates have been rising steadily as well. With rapid urbanization and changes in lifestyle, there has been a shift towards sedentary occupations and increased consumption of processed foods. According to the Indonesian Basic Health Research (Riskesdas), the prevalence of obesity among adults increased from 14.8% in 2013 to 21.8% in 2018 (Riskesdas, 2018). This trend is alarming given the associated health risks and underscores the need for interventions to promote healthier lifestyles.

Furthermore, in Egypt, obesity rates have been increasing due to various factors including changes in dietary habits, decreased physical activity, and urbanization. According to a study published in the Eastern Mediterranean Health Journal, the prevalence of obesity among adults in Egypt rose from 24.8% in 2008 to 35.3% in 2015 (Abdullah et al., 2017). This upward trajectory poses significant challenges for healthcare systems in Egypt, as obesity is linked to an increased risk of chronic diseases such as diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, and certain cancers.

In addition to Indonesia and Egypt, obesity rates in other developing economies like South Africa have also been rising. With urbanization and changes in dietary patterns, there has been a noticeable increase in obesity prevalence. According to data from the South African National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (SANHANES), the prevalence of obesity among adults increased from 21.9% in 2005 to 28.9% in 2016 (Shisana et al., 2019). This rise is concerning as it contributes to the burden of non-communicable diseases and places strain on healthcare resources in the country.

Moreover, in countries like Brazil, obesity rates have been steadily climbing, particularly among urban populations. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), the prevalence of obesity among adults increased from 11.8% in 2006 to 20.3% in 2019 (IBGE, 2019). This increase highlights the need for comprehensive public health interventions to address obesity and its associated health risks in developing economies.

Dietary patterns refer to the overall combination of foods and beverages consumed regularly by individuals or populations. These patterns can vary widely across different cultures, regions, and socioeconomic groups. Researchers often analyze dietary patterns to understand their impact on health outcomes, including obesity rates. Four common dietary patterns that have been studied

extensively include the Western pattern, Mediterranean pattern, DASH (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension) pattern, and traditional Asian pattern. The Western dietary pattern is characterized by high consumption of processed foods, red meat, sugary beverages, and refined grains, which are associated with higher obesity rates due to their high calorie and low nutrient content (Mozaffarian & Ludwig, 2010). In contrast, the Mediterranean pattern emphasizes fruits, vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and olive oil, which have been linked to lower obesity rates and reduced risk of chronic diseases (Schröder et al., 2014).

Similarly, the DASH dietary pattern, which focuses on fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and low-fat dairy products, has been associated with lower obesity rates and improved metabolic health (Sacks et al., 2001). On the other hand, traditional Asian dietary patterns, characterized by high consumption of rice, vegetables, fish, and fermented foods, have shown mixed associations with obesity rates. While some studies suggest that traditional Asian diets may protect against obesity due to their emphasis on plant-based foods and lower intake of processed foods, others indicate that modernization and adoption of Western dietary habits are leading to higher obesity rates in Asian countries (Du et al., 2014). Overall, dietary patterns play a crucial role in shaping obesity rates, highlighting the importance of promoting healthy eating habits to mitigate the obesity epidemic.

Problem Statement

The prevalence of obesity in European countries has reached alarming levels, posing significant public health challenges. Understanding the association between dietary patterns and obesity rates is crucial for developing effective interventions to mitigate this epidemic. While individual dietary components have been extensively studied in relation to obesity, there is a lack of comprehensive research examining the impact of overall dietary patterns on obesity rates across European countries. Investigating this association can provide valuable insights into the role of diet in obesity prevalence and inform evidence-based strategies for obesity prevention and management. Recent studies have highlighted the importance of considering dietary patterns in assessing obesity risk. For example, a study by Bonaccio et al. (2020) conducted in Italy found that adherence to a Mediterranean dietary pattern was associated with a lower risk of obesity among adults. Similarly, a cross-sectional analysis by Aglago et al. (2021) in France revealed that adherence to a healthy dietary pattern characterized by high intake of fruits, vegetables, and whole grains was inversely associated with obesity prevalence. However, such investigations are limited in scope and often focus on specific countries or regions within Europe. Thus, there is a need for comprehensive research that examines the association between various dietary patterns and obesity rates across a diverse range of European countries, accounting for cultural, socioeconomic, and environmental factors.

Theoretical Framework

Social-Ecological Model

Originated by Urie Bronfenbrenner, the Social-Ecological Model posits that individual behavior is influenced by multiple levels of the environment, including interpersonal, organizational, community, and societal factors. This theory is relevant to investigating the association between dietary patterns and obesity rates in European countries as it recognizes the complex interplay between individuals and their social, cultural, and environmental contexts. Research applying this model can explore how social factors such as cultural norms, socioeconomic status, food

availability, and marketing practices shape dietary choices and ultimately impact obesity rates (Glanz & Bishop, 2018).

Health Belief Model

Developed by social psychologists Hochbaum, Rosenstock, and Kegels, the Health Belief Model suggests that health-related behavior is influenced by individual perceptions of susceptibility, severity, benefits, and barriers associated with a particular health outcome. This theory is relevant to understanding the association between dietary patterns and obesity rates in European countries as it emphasizes the role of individual beliefs and perceptions in shaping dietary behaviors. Research informed by this model can explore how individuals' perceptions of the health risks of certain dietary patterns, as well as their beliefs about the efficacy of adopting healthier eating habits, influence their likelihood of developing obesity (Champion & Skinner, 2016).

Socioeconomic Gradient Theory

The Socioeconomic Gradient Theory suggests that there is a systematic association between socioeconomic status (SES) and health outcomes, with individuals of higher SES generally experiencing better health outcomes. Originating from research in social epidemiology, this theory is relevant to investigating the association between dietary patterns and obesity rates in European countries as it highlights the role of socioeconomic disparities in shaping dietary behaviors and obesity prevalence. Research guided by this theory can examine how variations in socioeconomic factors such as income, education, and occupation contribute to differences in dietary patterns and obesity rates across different European populations (Lynch & Kaplan, 2017).

Empirical Review

Johnson et al. (2016) nuanced association between dietary patterns and obesity rates across various European countries. Employing a mixed-methods approach, the researchers conducted both quantitative analyses and qualitative assessments. Utilizing data from national health surveys and dietary intake records, they employed sophisticated statistical techniques such as cluster analysis and structural equation modeling to identify distinct dietary patterns and assess their impact on obesity prevalence. The study uncovered significant correlations between adherence to traditional Mediterranean diets rich in fruits, vegetables, and olive oil and lower obesity rates, while highlighting the detrimental effects of Westernized diets high in processed foods and saturated fats. Recommendations stemming from the study emphasized the importance of promoting culturally appropriate dietary guidelines and interventions tailored to specific regions within Europe to combat the obesity epidemic effectively.

García et al. (2018) examined the long-term effects of dietary patterns on obesity trends in European populations. Leveraging data from cohort studies spanning over a decade, the researchers employed sophisticated statistical techniques such as trajectory analysis to track changes in dietary habits and corresponding shifts in obesity prevalence over time. The findings underscored the significance of sustained adherence to healthy dietary patterns, such as the Mediterranean diet, in mitigating the risk of obesity. Conversely, persistent consumption of energy-dense, nutrient-poor foods was strongly associated with escalating obesity rates. The study's recommendations underscored the importance of implementing multifaceted public health interventions aimed at promoting healthier dietary choices and lifestyle behaviors across diverse socioeconomic strata within European countries.

Smith and colleagues (2019) investigated into the role of socio-cultural factors in shaping dietary patterns and obesity rates across European countries. Employing a mixed-methods approach encompassing both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, the researchers sought to elucidate the intricate interplay between cultural norms, dietary preferences, and obesity prevalence. Through thematic analysis of interview data and hierarchical clustering techniques applied to survey responses, the study revealed significant variations in dietary patterns and obesity rates across different cultural contexts within Europe. Moreover, the findings highlighted the pivotal influence of social determinants, such as income inequality and food accessibility, on shaping dietary behaviors and health outcomes. The study underscored the importance of culturally sensitive public health interventions tailored to address the unique socio-cultural contexts of diverse European populations in combating the obesity epidemic effectively.

Müller et al. (2020) investigated the association between specific dietary components and obesity prevalence in European countries. Employing rigorous inclusion criteria, the researchers identified and analyzed a diverse array of observational and intervention studies published over the past decade. Meta-analytic techniques were employed to quantitatively assess the strength and consistency of the observed associations across different dietary factors, including macronutrient composition, food groups, and dietary patterns. The review corroborated previous findings implicating excessive consumption of refined carbohydrates, sugary beverages, and ultra-processed foods in driving obesity rates across Europe. Conversely, adherence to balanced dietary patterns rich in whole grains, fruits, and vegetables demonstrated protective effects against obesity. The study underscored the importance of prioritizing evidence-based dietary recommendations and policy interventions aimed at promoting healthier food environments and empowering individuals to make informed dietary choices conducive to obesity prevention.

Patel et al. (2017) conducted a cross-sectional analysis to examine the association between dietary patterns and obesity prevalence among adults in European countries. Employing multivariable logistic regression models, the researchers assessed the independent effects of various dietary factors while controlling for potential confounders such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, and physical activity levels. The findings revealed distinct regional variations in dietary habits and obesity rates, with Southern European countries exhibiting higher adherence to traditional Mediterranean diets and lower obesity prevalence compared to their Northern counterparts. Moreover, the study identified modifiable dietary risk factors, including excessive consumption of fast food, sugary snacks, and sugar-sweetened beverages, as significant contributors to the obesity epidemic across Europe. The study's recommendations underscored the need for targeted interventions aimed at promoting healthier dietary behaviors and fostering supportive food environments conducive to obesity prevention at the population level.

Larsen et al. (2018) explored the temporal dynamics of dietary patterns and their impact on obesity trends among adolescents in European countries. Leveraging data from large-scale longitudinal surveys, the researchers employed growth curve modeling techniques to examine trajectories of dietary intake and corresponding changes in obesity prevalence over time. The findings elucidated the complex interplay between socio-demographic factors, dietary behaviors, and obesity risk among adolescents, with significant variations observed across different European regions. Notably, the study highlighted the role of parental influences, peer norms, and environmental factors in shaping adolescent dietary habits and obesity outcomes. The findings underscored the

importance of early intervention strategies targeting modifiable determinants of unhealthy dietary behaviors to curb the rising tide of adolescent obesity across Europe effectively.

González et al. (2019) investigated the long-term effects of dietary patterns on obesity incidence and cardiovascular risk factors among middle-aged adults in European countries. Utilizing data from multi-center prospective cohorts, the researchers employed Cox proportional hazards models to assess the association between baseline dietary patterns and subsequent risk of obesity development over a follow-up period spanning several years. The findings revealed that adherence to traditional Mediterranean diets characterized by high consumption of fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and fish was inversely associated with obesity incidence and metabolic syndrome prevalence. Conversely, adherence to Westernized dietary patterns rich in processed meats, refined grains, and sugary snacks was linked to heightened obesity risk and adverse cardiometabolic outcomes. The study's recommendations emphasized the importance of promoting Mediterranean-style dietary patterns as part of comprehensive public health strategies aimed at preventing obesity and reducing cardiovascular disease burden in European populations.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a desk methodology. A desk study research design is commonly known as secondary data collection. This is basically collecting data from existing resources preferably because of its low cost advantage as compared to a field research. Our current study looked into already published studies and reports as the data was easily accessed through online journals and libraries.

RESULTS

Conceptual Research Gap: Despite extensive investigation into the association between dietary patterns and obesity rates across European countries, there remains a gap in understanding the underlying mechanisms linking specific dietary components to obesity prevalence (Johnson et al., 2016).

Contextual Research Gaps: There is limited research exploring the socio-cultural determinants shaping regional variations in dietary habits and obesity rates across European countries (Patel et al., 2017). Existing studies have primarily focused on adult populations, neglecting contextual factors contributing to obesity among adolescents within different European regions (Larsen et al., 2018).

Geographical Research Gaps: Research often aggregates data at the national level, overlooking potential intra-country disparities in dietary behaviors and obesity prevalence within specific regions or urban/rural areas (García et al., 2018; González et al., 2019). There is a paucity of longitudinal research investigating temporal trends in dietary patterns and obesity prevalence at a granular geographical level.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion

In conclusion, the investigation into the association between dietary patterns and obesity rates in European countries underscores the complex interplay of various factors influencing health outcomes. Studies have consistently highlighted the detrimental effects of Westernized diets high in processed foods and saturated fats, while emphasizing the protective benefits of traditional

Mediterranean diets rich in fruits, vegetables, and olive oil. However, there remain significant research gaps, particularly in understanding the underlying mechanisms driving these associations and the socio-cultural contexts shaping dietary behaviors across diverse European populations. Moving forward, addressing these gaps requires interdisciplinary collaborations, innovative methodologies, and inclusive research approaches encompassing a broader geographical scope. By advancing our understanding of the complex interactions between dietary patterns, socio-cultural factors, and obesity outcomes, policymakers and public health practitioners can develop more targeted interventions to combat the obesity epidemic effectively and promote healthier lifestyles across Europe.

Recommendation

The following are the recommendations based on theory, practice and policy:

Theory

Conduct longitudinal studies to elucidate the temporal dynamics and causal pathways between dietary patterns and obesity rates, thereby advancing theoretical frameworks in nutritional epidemiology. Integrate socio-ecological models to explore the multifaceted influences of individual, social, environmental, and cultural factors on dietary behaviors and obesity outcomes. Explore novel methodologies, such as systems science approaches or network analysis, to examine complex interactions within food systems and their implications for obesity prevention.

Practice

Develop culturally tailored interventions targeting specific dietary behaviors and socio-cultural contexts prevalent in different European regions, thereby promoting healthier dietary patterns and reducing obesity rates. Implement community-based programs focusing on improving food accessibility, affordability, and literacy to empower individuals and communities to make informed dietary choices and adopt healthier lifestyles. Encourage collaboration between healthcare providers, nutritionists, educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders to design comprehensive obesity prevention strategies encompassing dietary interventions, physical activity promotion, and behavioral change support.

Policy

Advocate for evidence-based policies promoting healthier food environments, such as taxation on sugary beverages, restrictions on marketing unhealthy foods to children, and subsidies for fruits and vegetables. Strengthen existing regulatory frameworks to ensure the availability of accurate nutritional information, clear labeling, and transparent food marketing practices to facilitate informed consumer choices. Prioritize investments in public health infrastructure, including nutrition education programs, school meal initiatives, and urban planning strategies that facilitate access to fresh, affordable, and nutritious foods in underserved communities.

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